Reading shaped my dreams, and more reading helped me make my dreams come true.

—Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg

1

Joy

What Is It Good For?

Talking with a group of fifth graders, Donalyn invites the kids to think about what reading joy feels like to them. The students chat with each other first, then write in their notebooks for a few minutes—reflecting on their reading lives. Later, several kids share their thoughts and experiences:

Kim: Reading joy is endless time to read and piles of books. I can read whatever I want.

Hailey: Reading joy is feeling like the author is talking right to me. Like they see me.

Joseph: Reading joy is going on adventures in my head.

Hoyeon: Reading joy is learning something new. I feel smarter.

Isaac: Reading joy is using my imagination.

Brian: Reading joy is laughing when something funny happens to one of the characters.

Kellee: Reading joy is talking to my friends about the books we like.

Benji: Reading joy is listening to someone read a good story.

Kelvin: Reading joy is when I feel like the characters would be my friends if they were real.

Marcos: Reading joy is finding new graphic novels to read.

Alex: Reading doesn't feel like joy to me. It feels boring.

While reading joy varies from reader to reader and from one reading experience to another, we can see some commonalities and trends when talking with readers about what sparks joy for them. How can we continue to support young people as readers through childhood and adolescence? Let's back up and define what we mean when thinking about reading joy, then explore ways that educators and caregivers can foster reading joy for more kids.

What Do We Mean by Joy, Anyway?

Working with adult learners and kids, the two of us often guide other readers through the process of creating their reading autobiographies. A reading autobiography is a time line of a person's reading experiences—both positive and negative—from their first memories to the present. Reading autobiographies have been around awhile: Dr. G. Robert Carlsen collected reading autobiographies from his young adult literature graduate students more than fifty years ago (Carlsen and Sherrill 1988). Dr. Alfred Tatum (2009) formulated the concept of "textual lineages" to describe the texts that his adolescent Black male students found meaningful to them—the texts that shaped them. Dr. Tatum used these time lines to learn more about his students and to inform his decision-making about what texts students might share in class or read independently. Reading autobiographies can generate self-reflection and teach us about our own and others' reading lives. We might be unaware of how a book is changing us while we are reading it and might only recognize its lasting impact years later. Retracing our reading lives back a bit offers us this opportunity to learn more about ourselves and how specific books and reading experiences helped create who we are now.

> "We read books to find out who we are. What other people, real or imaginary, do and think and feel . . . is an essential guide to our understanding of what we ourselves are and may become."
>
> —URSULA K. LE GUIN

A reading autobiography encourages readers to revisit their reading experiences and identify turning points, trends, gaps, or touchstones in their reading histories. While we often live our reading lives in the present and the future, that is, the books we are reading right now and what we plan to read next—readers benefit from traveling back through the books we have read in the past such as childhood read-alouds, books we borrowed during trips to the library, whole-class texts we read (or didn't) in high school, the three years we read nothing but board books shared with our toddlers or research for grad school—all of our reading experiences up to this point. The texts we read have the potential to "not only reflect, but may also produce the self" (Moje et al. 2009, 416). Examining past reading experiences shows us the moments and texts that influence not only how we see ourselves as readers but also how we see ourselves. What we read can shape who we are.

This connection between our literacy and our identity runs through all of us. Our literacy experiences—whether joyful and engaging or boring and painful—influence our orientation toward reading, define the value we place on reading and how we see ourselves as readers, and often direct what texts we read. What we choose to read and how much time and effort we invest in reading (or don't) affect who we are. Literacy shapes identity and identity shapes literacy. We can't separate the two.

Every book we read offers potential benefits—knowledge, escape, entertainment, insight, and so on—but some books transform us in fundamental ways. Let's imagine we are sitting together—getting to know each other. As readers, our conversation might drift to the books we enjoy or feel strongly about in some way. We two will start:

> *Reading* The Velveteen Rabbit *when she was five or six, Donalyn discovered for the first time that books could evoke powerful emotions. She wept when the rabbit was lost. In elementary school, she read every Marguerite Henry book in the school library—feeding a passionate interest in horses and sparking a desire to become a veterinarian. As a teenager with a library card and freedom to read what she wanted at home, Donalyn burned through fat tomes from the best-seller lists (or anything turned into a television miniseries), like Pulitzer winners* Lonesome Dove, *by Larry McMurtry, and Alex Haley's epic history,* Roots. *At school, she trudged through assigned texts like* The Scarlet Letter *and* Huckleberry Finn *in English class. As a new teacher, reading Nancie Atwell's* In the Middle *and Ellin Keene's* Mosaic of Thought *shaped how she saw teaching and learning. Aware now that her childhood and early adult reading experiences skewed toward white, male authors, Donalyn has committed to reading more texts written by women and nonbinary creators,*

especially women of color. She reads across age ranges, formats, genres, and voices—appreciating everything from graphic novel memoirs like Almost American Girl: An Illustrated Memoir, *by Robin Ha, to the international best seller* My Sister, the Serial Killer, *by Oyinkan Braithwaite. These wide reading experiences have expanded her worldview, increased her knowledge of the world and its people, helped her confront her biases and prejudices, enriched her life, and provided countless hours of reading joy.*

Teri's first memory of reading was sitting on her grandfather's lap while he read Pat the Bunny *to her. Because the book is interactive, Teri learned that reading aloud might evoke responses. During her tween and teen years, Teri fell into the unconscious-delight phase of reading development. During these years, Teri tore through series books; Cherry Ames and Nancy Drew were her favorites. Later she dove headfirst into Stephen King and others in the horror genre. But when Teri began teaching middle school, she realized she lacked knowledge of what her students found good reading. Taking a young adult literature course changed Teri's reading once more. She sought out books her students recommended she read. She scoured the best-seller lists for teens and built her classroom library to include books that might provide joy for her students.*

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Middle School Fantasy & Sci-Fi Series

In the opening letter, we invited you to consider your reading life for moments of joy. Now, we invite you to go deeper. Think about your own reading life from your first childhood memories to the current day. What books and reading experiences might form your reading autobiography? How does reading fit into the story of your life? Which books have shaped who you are and how you see the world? A reading autobiography is not simply a list of memorable books, but it often starts there. After revisiting your reading memories for a few moments, jot a quick list of ten books or so that stand out in your memories for some reason. Don't overthink it. You don't have to impress anyone with this list! If it helps, make a time line in your mind and revisit different ages. Use some of our guiding questions to spark your thinking.

Reflecting on your brainstormed list, what do you notice? What reading experiences stand out to you? Did you revisit some books or experiences you'd forgotten? Does this list evoke memories of the people in your life who have shared books and reading with you (relatives, friends, colleagues, students)? How have your reading habits and preferences changed over time? Do you see gaps in your reading life? Were there times when reading was difficult or you didn't want to read? Why?

READING AUTOBIOGRAPHY GUIDING QUESTIONS

What is the first book you remember reading?

What read-alouds do you remember? At home? At school?

What books from your childhood or teen years do you remember reading?

What was the first book you read where you connected with the protagonist or subject?

What books have shaped your worldview or life choices?

What books have you shared with other readers?

Do you have traditions or rituals connected to specific books?

While creating a reading autobiography, readers often identify books or memories that evoke reading joy—audiobooks we listened to during family road trips, nightly read-alouds as a child or caregiver, traditions like rereading the same picture book on the first day of school, the influential teachers and librarians who read aloud and shared books with us, and the books and reading experiences we have shared with our own students and children. Along with the positive reading experiences and memories, people revisit time periods in their lives when they didn't read much, suffered through boring reading assignments, or felt shame or failure as a reader.

To deepen the reflective benefits of your reading autobiography, you can select one title or reading experience and write about its importance in more detail. What do you recall about the experience or book? Why is it meaningful or influential to you? Under what circumstances did you read or share this book? Do you connect reading it with significant people or events in your life? What does this recollection show you about your relationship with reading? We will share a few of our examples:

When revisiting a memory of reading joy in her own life, Donalyn remembers a languid summer day when her daughters, Celeste and Sarah, were at the lake with friends, her husband, Don, was at work, and she spent the entire afternoon reading. She had purchased Gayle Forman's heartbreaking If I Stay *and Rebecca Stead's brilliantly plotted* When You Reach Me, *and she read both books from cover to cover—barely stopping for breaks. Donalyn cried, laughed, worried, cheered, and savored a rare opportunity to devour two memorable books in one afternoon. Don came home from work and wondered why the house was growing dark and his wife was nowhere to be found. He only smiled and shook his head when he found Donalyn curled up on their bed, with balled tissues strewn around her, napping after her reading binge!*

Teri has learned how reading joy can also be a sustaining force: during her lengthy cancer treatment, Teri lost the ability to read for more than a few seconds because of medical side effects and fatigue. When her chemotherapy and radiation treatments ended, she slowly built up her reading stamina and attention, again. First, she began with picture books, but she could read only a few pages. Slowly, she worked up to completing a picture book, then moved on to graphic novels. Again, she could only read and understand a few pages before she had to stop. Finally, she was able to read Hope Larson's graphic novel adaptation of Madeleine L'Engle's A Wrinkle in Time *in one sitting. Teri read and enjoyed the original text when she was younger and believes that her background knowledge with the traditional text gave her the scaffolding needed to focus on Larson's illustrations and format. Teri's journey back to reading for pleasure reminds us that we don't fall in love with reading once; we recommit to reading again and again. When you love to read, you can always find your way home to it.*

When you love to read, you can always find your way home to it.

Reflecting on these reading experiences, we can identify moments of reading joy: the delight in reading a book in one sitting, the emotional and intellectual journey of reading great stories, the pleasure of reaching a personal reading challenge, the comfort and nostalgia of revisiting a childhood favorite.

For an individual reader, creating a personal reading autobiography or time line can reveal powerful experiences that have shaped who you are as a reader, educator, caregiver, and person. As teachers and librarians, we can collect reading autobiographies from many readers and evaluate them for commonalities and differences. This snapshot of readers' attitudes, habits, preferences, and experiences across a reading community informs our understanding of readers' needs and the supports needed to engage them with reading. You might identify avid readers from less interested ones or recognize trends in books influencing their education and identity development. You can begin to understand their reading preferences and gaps and the activities they like to do before, during, and after they read.

Reading autobiographies offer rich opportunities for discussion. After brainstorming their personal lists of influential titles, readers can share their lists with a partner or small group. Some readers will find they have books in common. Intrigued by books their discussion partners share, people may jot down suggested titles they want to read. After all, these titles are powerful for at least one reader we know! Occasionally, readers discover that books they hadn't liked were influential to their discussion partners. Facilitating this activity with groups of educators many times, we have never seen a single title appear on everyone's list. So much for that classic canon everyone needs to read as part of our cultural and social heritage. It's clear that people who read for a lifetime build personal canons (Miller and Kelley 2013), which can include books we share in common with other readers and books that matter to us for personal reasons alone.

Leading adults through the process of creating a reading autobiography in a workshop, PLC meeting, or literacy program offers opportunities for reflection and insight into the importance of reading joy in our reading lives. If we identify positively as readers, we undoubtedly have more instances of reading joy in our histories than negative experiences.

"Books make people quiet, yet they are so loud."

–Nnedi Okorafor

Our children are collecting reading experiences in our classrooms and homes right now. How are these experiences shaping the people and readers they will become? Are they reading books that might form their personal canons? Do we celebrate every book a child reads as one more potential touchstone on their reading journey? Do our children have gaps in their reading histories? How can we help them find some positive reading experiences? Most of all, how can we provide them space and time to reflect on the books they read and consider how these books shape and represent who they are?

For K–12 students, reading autobiographies work best as a midyear or end-of-year reflection. By framing the activity within the boundaries of the current school year, teachers have more influence over classroom reading conditions and experiences. Additionally, we have learned that we must forge one-on-one relationships with students as readers and people before asking them to reveal their reading lives and share them with others. Sharing details of their reading lives carries vulnerability and risk. Better to wait until you have formed a supportive reading community. We have led these activities with students of various ages and backgrounds and have found the most success with older students—upper middle school and high school. Be prepared—older kids often share a *lot* of negative reading experiences.

"I just don't find reading fun and it is very boring to me."

–CASSIDEE, 7TH GRADER

For students with reading difficulties or poor reading experiences, reading autobiographies can reinforce feelings of frustration and failure. Individual interest surveys, reading reflections, and one-on-one reading conferences offer safer, low-risk options for students to share their reading successes and challenges with you. (We will discuss interest surveys in Chapter 5.) Publicly sharing the differences between the kids who enjoy reading and those who don't undermines the establishment of a nurturing, inclusive reading community—our long-term goal.

Why Does Joy Matter?

Sadly, the very joy that feeds reading engagement can be treated as insignificant in school. Data-driven policies and high-stakes testing mandates create cultures that value narrowly defined skills. While effective models

of reading comprehension instruction include direct instruction and goal-setting, they are not the only factors at work: effective instruction also considers students' engagement with text through reading widely and in volume, discussing and analyzing texts, or writing responses (Duke, Ward, and Pearson 2021). Engagement—a driver of reading joy—fosters reading motivation and interest (Guthrie, Wigfield, and You 2012). Increased reading motivation sparks reading volume and variety (Fisher, Frey, and Lapp 2012), which correlates with higher test scores (Sullivan and Brown 2015). Avid readers possess broader vocabularies and background knowledge (Wasik, Hindman, and Snell 2016; Sullivan and Brown 2015; Cunningham and Stanovich 2003). Graduating strong readers benefits society through higher educational attainment (Krashen 2004), which increases productivity, according to the Economic Policy Institute (Garcia and Weiss 2015). It follows that reading opportunities encouraging joy are not a waste of instructional time or teacher concern.

There's more to reading than school-based value systems for it.

Additionally, we cannot lose sight of our higher aspirations for students: sending people out into the world who find comfort, entertainment, edification, inspiration, provocation, and joy from reading improves the quality of their lives and relationships with others (Dodell-Feder and Tamir 2018). Reading even reduces stress levels better than relaxation methods like listening to music or playing video games (Lewis 2009)! Mason, an Illinois seventh grader, describes the stress relief of reading during the COVID-19 pandemic:

> *I use reading to take away my stress and anxiety. This year has been the worst for me mentally and with covid, school, and sports I am mentally not alright but reading keeps me sane. After practices I sit in my bed and read with normally a cup of tea by my side to help me sleep. I often sit in my bed and read before bed and sometimes I read extra when I can't sleep at night. Recently I have felt better mentally by reading and I will continue to read for the end of time.*

Mason's commitment to keep reading "for the end of time" shows that he values reading for far more than its academic benefits. If our goal remains educating the whole child by attending to their cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development, it seems that fostering lifelong reading behaviors would help more young people reach their full potential and health. There's more to life than school and work. There's more to reading than school-based value systems for it.

The two of us have spent most of our careers in education trying to justify pleasure reading to adults, so that they will let their kids and students choose what they read more often. In our work, we've learned that it can be difficult to identify and explain the links between reading joy, reading motivation, and reading proficiency without first considering what is at work. We have invited you to travel back through your reading life and identify joyful moments of yours. Now, let's travel back one hundred years and look at an earlier attempt to name and frame reading joy.

The Seven Joys of Reading

We are not the first or last people fascinated with reading joy. In 1910, librarian Mary Plummer identified seven distinct reading joys. While Plummer was reflecting on her reading life in the early twentieth century, the joys she identified still have relevance today and help us appreciate specific aspects of the reading experience that keep readers invested in reading.

"Some books are so familiar that reading them is like being home again."

—LOUISA MAY ALCOTT, *LITTLE WOMEN*

At the time, Plummer was living through a sea change in librarianship that was quite provocative. Beyond librarians' traditional role as collection developers and reading advisers for their patrons, it was becoming more accepted and embraced for librarians to experience the joy of reading for themselves! Before this time, librarians were not expected to read for pleasure once they became librarians. Reading had been viewed as a waste of librarians' time and professional expertise:

> *Whereas, the time was when books were regarded as things to be entered, catalogued, classified, shelf-listed, and then given out in as great numbers as possible to a more or less willing public, and the numbers reported with pride to the professional journals. It seems to have occurred to the majority, as it never failed to present itself to the minority, that books are also to be read; that, in fact, that is what they are for. (Plummer 1910, 454)*

This new direction had a liberating and powerful effect. As Plummer explained, "We are free to read and read openly and need no longer pretend that we read everything long ago, before we became librarians and found something more important to think of" (455). Plummer noted the rise in popularity for literary events known as "book symposiums," meetings where readers shared and "enthused about" specific titles to other readers, and the production of "bulletins" created by librarians to share staff book reviews with patrons (455). While the practice of recommending and celebrating books is now commonplace in libraries, these events sprang up only when readers' joy was considered desirable to encourage. Right now, the role of librarians is once again being redefined—pulling many school librarians away from building reading advisory relationships with students or even removing librarians altogether. We cannot forget the importance of librarians in promoting and nurturing reading joy.

> "I read a lot and I love reading so much. It is a nice way to wind down before you go to bed."
>
> –MARISSA, 7TH GRADER

As you read through the descriptions for the seven types of reading joy that follow, ask yourself: How have I felt these joys in my own life? What would my students say about these joys in their lives? Which conditions and experiences might foster reading joy? How does my definition of reading joy differ from Plummer's vision of it?

The Joy of Familiarity

The joy of familiarity is the recognition readers feel when encountering something in a text they have personally experienced or read in another text.

In our lives, we find joy in what's familiar because it provides a sense of belonging, confidence, and continuity. Beloved stories, songs, prayers, and poems thread through our family and community life and provide a foundation for many of our literacy experiences inside and outside of school. We tell family stories at birthday parties, weddings, and wakes—keeping our ancestors alive and sharing our pasts with our children until they know our stories as if they lived them, too. We find connections with strangers when we recognize and love the same words—our high school motto, choruses from popular songs, movie taglines, campfire ghost stories, or Twitter memes.

We see this desire for familiarity when our children ask for the same bedtime story or read-aloud over and over. Donalyn and her husband read books like Sandra Boyton's *Barnyard Dance!* every night for weeks because their daughters begged to hear the familiar rhythm and laugh at the characters' antics. You might see the joy of familiarity at work when your students ask you to reread a picture book, poem, or article you have shared in class—revisiting parts they enjoyed or questioned, or rereading the entire text. When kids reread a text, they deepen their understanding of it and forge stronger connections between themselves and the book (Rodriguez 2018).

When some children reread books, they want to travel back through the experience of reading it again. They want to visit characters who have become their book friends. They want to go on an adventure with the comfort of knowing they will find their way back home—because they always have before. Even Teri's college students ask her to recommend books "just like" the Hunger Games. And, of course, anyone who has spent time with Shel Silverstein's "Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout Would Not Take the Garbage Out" or Langston Hughes' "Dreams" may well be able to continue from memory after hearing the opening lines.

The joy of familiarity takes on added significance for children of color, who are far less likely to find authors, illustrators, and characters who look like them or topics and subjects that center people and characters like their families and neighbors. Seeing their identities and familiar experiences authentically represented influences their positive identity development and sense of belonging and empowerment (Tatum 2009; Johnson and Parker 2020).

The Joy of Surprise

The joy of surprise is the reading experience of making new discoveries, finding something unusual or unexpected, or rediscovering universal truths.

As Donalyn turns the last page of Jon Klassen's *I Want My Hat Back*, her fourth-grade class quiets and students scan the final two-page illustration—a bear, wearing a hat, surrounded by broken sticks, leaves, and debris. Inferring the startling ending of this playful book, several students chuckle or gasp. Students start whispering, eager to discuss their ideas.

For Teri, often the joy of surprise appears when her university students read graphic novels, many for the first time. The surprise is generally expressed as, "I had no idea that graphic novels could be literary. I thought they were just comics."

"Joy is an act of resistance."

-Toi Derricotte

While readers find comfort in the familiar, we also enjoy reading texts that surprise us. Few readers would continue reading if every story sounded the same or we never acquired new information. Plummer believed the joy of surprise "belongs in a measure to childhood when everything is new and the trick of weaving plots is unsuspected" (1910, 457), but the joy of surprise keeps people reading long after childhood ends.

As readers who have read, evaluated, shared, and discussed thousands of books, both of us still feel the joy of surprise when we read an unpredicted twist or encounter unique or new-to-us ways to tell stories and organize information, like Keiko Kasza's playful circular story, *Finders Keepers*. Readers delight when authors cleverly break conventional rules for grammar, punctuation, and formatting. We gasp at we-never-saw-it-coming reveals in young adult books like Adam Silvera's *More Happy Than Not* and Tiffany D. Jackson's *Allegedly*. We feel the contagious bounce of wordplay in books like Kwame Alexander's *Booked*. We savor lush, evocative sentences in books like Laura Ruby's *Bone Gap*. We find ourselves startled by new views of familiar characters and stories in parodies or variants, like Humpty Dumpty in Dan Santat's *After the Fall* or Matt Phelan's *Snow White: A Graphic Novel*, set in New York City in the 1920s.

Young readers experience the joy of surprise as their reading experiences grow and diversify. Their schema and background knowledge expand and evolve with each new reading event. Every archetype, cliché, historical or cultural reference, joke, or meme we know was surprising to us once upon a time.

The Joy of Sympathy

The joy of sympathy is the deep emotional connection readers feel for individual characters, subjects, or authors.

Heavenly sits under a sapling tree on the playground's edge—devouring the last few pages of Lynda Mullaly Hunt's *One for the Murphys* during recess. Walking over to Donalyn when she finishes the book, Heavenly smiles through her tears. "That was such a good book. The ending was so sad. I hope Carley [the main character] will be OK." Heavenly wanders off—still lost in the foster child's hopeful story.

Several years ago, Teri met with a small group in her class to discuss Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*. It was an hour of story after story from the six women. It seemed that each one had personal connections to the book and to the topic of rape or sexual assault. The story resonated with

them, and their sympathy spread from one to another. The book offered a catalyst for this communal moment.

The joy of sympathy is the bond we readers feel when we find an author or characters who are simpatico, who seem to be kindred souls. It springs from the emotional attachments we develop. If you have felt yourself bursting with happiness at a character's well-deserved good fortune, if you have wept for a character's circumstances, if you have thrown a book across the room at an author's choices to torture their own characters, or if you have reread treasured books to experience the angst or heartbreak one more time or just to visit an old friend, you have felt this peculiar joy.

Donalyn's husband, Don, has been reading Stephen King's books since he was a 1980s teenager. These days, he follows King on Twitter and keeps up with his favorite author's public life beyond his books. Don's fondness for Stephen King's writing intersects with his admiration for a cultural icon. We see our favorite authors, characters, or stories as companions in our lives. Those authors' styles, their world building, or their specific characters or settings resonate with us.

For young readers, we teachers and librarians can foster the joy of sympathy by introducing students to as many authors, illustrators, and cultures as possible through the texts we share in class, promote in the library, or assign to read. By reading widely and freely, students are more likely to discover the voices and stories that resonate with them.

The Joy of Appreciation

The joy of appreciation is the delight of reading beautiful writing, a reader's admiration for an author's flair for words or a text's language and style.

When Teri's granddaughter, Corrie, was in high school, she was assigned to read *The Chocolate War*, by Robert Cormier. Teri passed her copy along to Corrie. After about forty-five minutes, Corrie came out of her room exultant. "Nana, this is like having CliffsNotes!" she crowed. Teri had forgotten that when she had first read the novel, she had highlighted, annotated, and questioned the text throughout, noting how Cormier's writing was very much like that of Ernest Hemingway's, with short staccato sentences and a deep examination of protagonist and antagonist. Her delight and appreciation for the language of the book had driven her furious annotations! Teri's granddaughter was able to benefit from her grandmother's observations as she read the book behind her.

Delicious word choices; precise language; an interesting turn of phrase; a rich description or poignant conversation: the joy of appreciation compels us to read these treasures out loud to anyone nearby, to copy phrases into our notebooks or phones, to look up unknown words, and to consider familiar words in new contexts. Appreciation plays a role in why elementary students repeat snatches of poems and songs and why adolescents scrawl favorite lyrics across their notebook covers.

Working with students, we can provide instruction and practice in vocabulary and figurative language as well as point out and discuss examples of powerful and interesting word choices, syntax, and language in the texts students encounter through read-alouds, shared reading, and small-group work. We can invite students to collect interesting-to-them words, lines, lyrics, and phrases in their notebooks. Donalyn and her sixth-grade students created a "graffiti wall" with butcher paper and metallic markers and recorded their favorite lines from the books they read. This wall became a space for students to share and celebrate the power, beauty, and fun of words. Often, one line from a beloved book, scrawled on the graffiti wall, enticed another reader to seek out the book and try it! Those one-sentence snippets from books encouraged more independent reading and community building.

The Joy of Expansion

The joy of expansion broadens our worldview, embraces new knowledge, and increases our understanding of other people and places.

When Donalyn taught sixth grade, the staff led a schoolwide reading of Sharon Draper's *Out of My Mind*, the story of Melody, a sixth grader with cerebral palsy who longs to be seen for more than her physical disabilities. With a rapidly growing student body of over a thousand fifth and sixth graders and a wide range of programs for special needs students on campus, faculty

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People and Science

and staff worried that their students didn't have enough opportunities to interact with kids outside of class. Bullying, fights, and arguments between kids were on the rise, and it seemed students lacked compassion for people outside their immediate social groups. The faculty and staff hoped that reading and discussing Draper's book as a school community would foster more inclusivity and acceptance.

The principal purchased a copy of Draper's book for every adult who worked in the school and asked everyone to read it. He ensured the librarian could purchase several copies for the school library. One teacher from each grade-level team read the book aloud with students over the next month or so. Soon, conversations about Melody's experiences and readers' reactions popped up all over campus. Kids talked with other kids and could also talk with any adult in the building. Many parents and caregivers borrowed or purchased copies of the book to read. Not only did this "one book, one school" event expand students' awareness for children with disabilities, but the community-wide reading experience sparked conversations and interactions between educators, school staff, kids, and families who might not have talked much before the book gave them a jumping-off point.

Donalyn's experiences illustrate Plummer's vision of the joy of expansion: reading experiences that "make one rise from a book a changed being, with wider horizons, broader sympathies, deeper comprehension, and no less firm a grip on the essentials because the non-essentials have been classified as such at last" (1910, 462).

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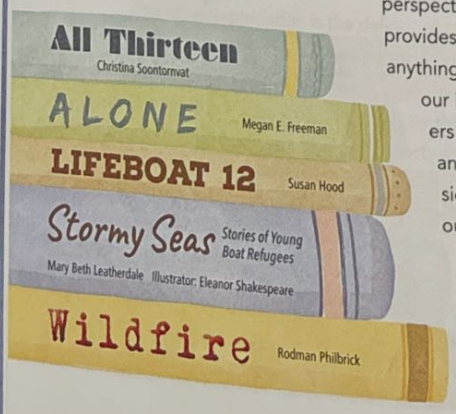
Survival



Expansive reading experiences open readers up to people, worlds, ideas, and philosophies far beyond their own limited perspectives and experiences. Reading provides us with a resource to learn about anything we want and to find outlets for our imaginations. It encourages readers to leave behind ways of thinking and looking at the world and consider it through different lenses than our habitual, comfortable ones.

When readers connect to characters in books, they gain deeper understanding of what an experience might feel like even if they have never experienced it themselves. Readers place themselves more firmly within the story, soaring and plummeting with a book's characters.

The Joy of Shock

The joy of shock is the experience of encountering ideas or events that alter our self-perception, unsettle us, or seek to dismantle deeply held beliefs or understandings.

While reading Maura Cullen's *35 Dumb Things Well-Intended People Say: Surprising Things We Say That Widen the Diversity Gap*, Donalyn was compelled to examine her own prejudices and biases and reflect on her use of terms like *color-blind* that might appear inclusive at first but in fact reinforce racial inequities and stereotypes. Reading Cullen's book gave Donalyn concrete examples of errors in her thinking and showed her a way of interrogating the implicit bias in some of the words and phrases she used and the ideas she held. This book, along with many others, has shaped her understanding of systemic bias and racism and has helped her to begin to identify and dismantle her unconscious biases.

Plummer describes authors who shock us as "jugglers" because "they twist and turn the truth so that it has facets we never saw before, and either we think we have never seen truth at all until now or because of its newness we refuse to recognize this one aspect of it" (1910, 463). We might not consider shock a joyful experience until we recall that joyful reading includes every reading experience that keeps us invested in reading. Certainly, for many people, reading's ability to dismantle previously held beliefs, disrupt our thinking, and force us to question our worldview adds necessary intellectual and emotional challenge to our lives.

The reading joy of shock can be disconcerting, perhaps even painful at first. But we are able to persevere and persist, and the books that shock us also awaken us to other possibilities and exhort us to grow. Kafka observed (1979):

> *I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound or stab us. If the book we're reading doesn't wake us up with a blow on the head, what are we reading it for? . . . But we need the books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved*

more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us. That is my belief. (30)

While reading joys like the joy of surprise occur more frequently in childhood, we imagine that young people experience the joy of shock less often. Children's and adolescents' worldviews and understandings shift as they encounter new information and ideas—making them less fixed and rigid in their beliefs and more willing to adjust their schema than adults. We must understand this influence on students' identity development when selecting the texts we read, discuss, and promote.

The Joy of Revelation

The joy of revelation is the rare experience of reading a text that provides deep insight into the universe or human existence.

"It was almost too much to take in," Teri recalls. She knew *Tuesdays with Morrie*, by Mitch Albom, was about the author's favorite teacher. But Teri was emotionally ill-prepared for how deeply the book would affect her. The relationship Mitch and Morrie shared as teacher and student over the years grew and evolved, like all lasting relationships must. Some of the changes were joyous; others were heart-wrenching. Henry, Teri's husband, was concerned when he found her sobbing while reading. Teri attempted to explain what the book had revealed to her about relationships, love, loss, and memory, but her attempts fell short. Readers may not realize how revelatory a book is for us while we are reading it.

What shapes our understanding of the universe and our place in it? Our life experiences, our interactions and relationships with others and with nature, the places we visit, the art we see, hear, and create—all have the potential to reveal truths about human existence we never previously recognized or understood. The books we read carry this power, too. From talking with readers, we've discovered that the joy of revelation is so unique to the lived experiences of each person, it cannot be generalized to common examples. The reading experiences or knowledge shaping your larger worldview and personal identity development wouldn't affect another reader in the same way.

> "Remember, the firemen are rarely necessary. The public itself stopped reading of its own accord."
> —RAY BRADBURY, *FAHRENHEIT 451*

We can help young readers identify and process their own revelatory experiences by sharing and discussing the real-life epiphanies of artists, explorers, and inventors and pointing out such moments in the texts we read together. We can invite students to share what surprised them in the text or changed their thinking.

The joy of revelation occurs in an instant as we encounter something profound. We read a passage or book and we find that it pulls back the curtain on the world to help us see something about life we didn't previously realize. We cannot go back three pages ago and unwind what we just read, and we will never be the same.

While every reader experiences revelation in their own way, James Baldwin described reading's revelations for him, which many readers will recognize: "You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, who had ever been alive" (1963). No matter how much the world changes, human beings possess many of the same attributes and flaws. Humans experience similar joys and tragedies across time, geography, and circumstances. Finding connections between our ourselves and others communicates that we are not alone, strange, failing, or doomed and reinforces that all people—no matter their culture, experiences, or points of view—share a universal humanity.

While Plummer described reading joy based on her experiences and worldview as a middle-class, college-educated, white woman in the early twentieth century, we can see relevance for readers today and recognize a deeper connection between reading joy and the long-term educational and social benefits of reading. Reading joy is the key to lifelong reading engagement—the driver of reading motivation and interest away from school.

The Lack of Reading Joy in School

Unfortunately, you don't have to talk with many kids to learn that for some young people, the self-direction and support needed to experience reading joy at school don't exist. Even when families and teachers support young readers' independent reading lives, students carry the accumulated

boredom and failure from any prior negative reading experiences, which makes them suspicious of efforts to engage them with reading in the future. Talking with a group of seventh and eighth graders recently, Donalyn heard a less than joyful perspective on reading:

> "Reading is a school thing."
>
> "The only reason to read is for school."
>
> "Why would I read when I don't have to?"
>
> "Reading is boring."
>
> "It takes too long to read a book. We spend weeks reading one [in class]. I don't have time."
>
> "I can't get to the library."

We hear similar complaints from elementary, middle, and high school readers all over. Not only is reading a chore, but many kids tell us they are overwhelmed and uninspired by the stuff they have to complete while they read and when they finish reading a text. Beyond the work of reading, students must create piles of evidence to prove they read and understood each discrete part of a text—annotations on sticky notes, reading response entries, graphic organizers, essays, book reports, projects, computerized comprehension tests, and more. Every once in a while, kids get an English teacher or a librarian who seems to really like reading and kids might find a few books they like that year, but positive reading experiences are few and far between. This is not a new phenomenon. Over several decades, George Norvell surveyed thousands of his college students about what they liked to read—in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. His bottom line: what was assigned in school was seldom what students enjoyed (Norvell 1990).

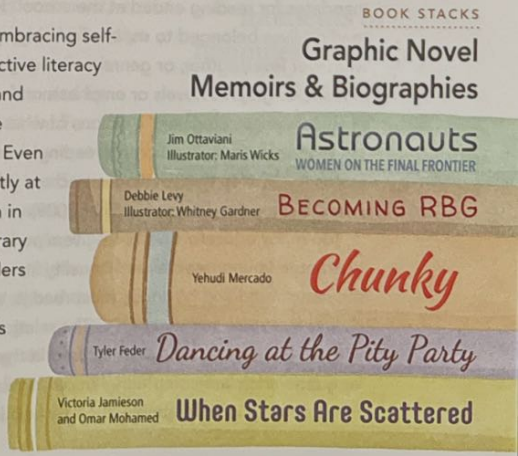
> "I think what makes reading good is the silence because it's hard to focus when it's loud and reading is nice and silent."
>
> —CAMERON, 5TH GRADER

For too many young people, reading is tedious and joyless. They read, but they are not invested *readers*. Schools (and homes) exert a powerful influence on the development of children's and adolescents' reading identities—how they perceive themselves positively or negatively as readers or view reading in general (McCarthey and Moje 2002). While educators should collaborate with families to support and extend literacy development at home, we must also take responsibility for how we present reading at school and ensure that we provide positive, nourishing, engaging reading experiences, too. We adults cannot relegate pleasure reading to the margins and hope that kids pick up a love of reading on their own.

Sadly, in too many schools and classrooms we visit, adults seem suspicious when kids (and other adults) enjoy reading too much. The reading, or work attached to the reading, must lack rigor or waste instructional time if kids are enjoying what they're reading. Ignoring or disrespecting how many adults read romances, murder mysteries, celebrity biographies, and magazines, some educators and caregivers become the reading police when scrutinizing kids' reading. If kids discover a book and like it, the book must be "trash" or lacking literary merit or value. In a study of middle schoolers' reading preferences and behaviors, Wilhelm, Smith, and Fransen (2014) found that when reading genre or light fiction such as horror, fantasy, and romance, students engaged in intellectually rigorous conversations about the books they read. Students also expressed higher enjoyment and interest in reading when encouraged to read whatever they wished from time to time.

It seems some adults want kids to read when the adults can control and define the reading conditions, but they don't trust kids to choose anything of value to read without their oversight. The skills and knowledge acquired through self-study like independent reading are often disregarded or ignored.

It's important to note that embracing self-teaching does not negate effective literacy instruction: explicit modeling and practice help students become confident, competent readers. Even children who read independently at an early age require instruction in language, comprehension, literary elements, and the skills of readers and writers.



Of course, learning to read is not easy for everyone. Donalyn's older daughter, Celeste, has been identified with dyslexia, dyscalculia,

and dysgraphia. Learning to read was challenging and as an adult, Celeste still finds reading laborious. Family read-alouds, lots of books at home, and support for her reading choices helped keep Celeste interested in reading. She also benefitted from tutoring in word recognition and comprehension strategies and metacognition. And, of course, what worked for Celeste might not work for another striving reader. As with any methodology applied to human beings, one size does not fit all. Individual learning challenges and the unique learning needs of neurodiverse people require educators to become good kidwatchers and diagnosticians—trying out strategies in collaboration with the child and their family members and reflecting on results.

Yet, no matter the challenges, all children, *even striving readers*, benefit from joyful reading, classrooms filled with books, a teacher who promotes reading, time to read self-selected books, and support for both learning to read and their reading identity development (Pressley, Graham, and Harris 2006; Allington and Gabriel 2012; Harvey and Ward 2017).

Educators' control of children's reading lives seemingly extends into home and summer reading, too. Parents and caregivers often rely on guidance from educators when directing their children's reading lives at home. Even those of us who grew up in the era of controlled vocabulary primers, round-robin reading, SRA cards, and book reports when we were students were spared this level of invasive control over our reading lives: school mandates for reading ended at the school door. Outside of school, our reading lives belonged to us. Limited only by our parents, we could read whatever level, author, or genre we wanted. Today, however, a teacher's disdain for graphic novels or emphasis on leveling, for example, can negatively influence caregivers' opinions of what their children should read and how to measure their children's reading development. This further reinforces to children that reading is a school job and not an act that has any personal meaning for them (Miller 2009).

Too many educators and caregivers perceive that the only way to guarantee young people read "quality literature" is if we dictate what they must read and how they must read it. Who gets to decide what is quality literature and what isn't? The relationships young people can build with reading simply aren't considered in the equation. Imagine sitting in language arts class completing worksheets on your whole-class novel, then filling out a graphic organizer on an article in your basal textbook, then taking a computer test on your library book. Why would any kid enjoy reading when it seems to require an endless pile of tests and work? Sadly, their parents endured similar classes. Now, they dislike reading, too. Some kids become readers in spite of school or a lack of home support, but, unsurprisingly, many don't. Intentionally or unintentionally, the adults in many children's lives send a message that reading joy is a side benefit—rare and unexpected—but not a legitimate or expected outcome of learning to read for most people.

Kids are hearing this message loud and clear. Too many kids tell us that the primary purpose of reading in their classes is to complete assignments with what they read. They believe that what they turn in to their teacher or show their parents or caregivers when they are done with reading is most important—the book report grade, the essay, or the worksheet. In their minds, no one cares about what happens inside readers when they read. No one talks about reading joy with them. Too many young people (and their caregivers and teachers) believe that the only reading measures that matter are a kid's performance on standardized tests and class assignments. It's a wonder *any* kids make it through school and still love to read.

In families where reading is encouraged, caregivers complain they often fight negative messaging about reading from school. When their children experience reading as a chore at school, it erodes positive reading experiences at home or can supplant them entirely. Sometimes, caregivers become subversive to keep children's love of reading alive: Donalyn refused to buy her younger daughter, Sarah, the five novels she was assigned to read for high school summer reading until the Fourth of July because she wanted Sarah to have at least a month of her school vacation to read whatever she wanted. While it might seem strange to promote reading by *not* buying books, it worked. Donalyn remembers the parents and caregivers of long-ago students who told her they signed their children's reading logs on Monday nights or Friday mornings—an act of compliance, not meaningful documentation of home reading. What right do schools have to dictate children's and adolescents' reading lives at home or during vacations, anyway? Too often educators blame caregivers when children and adolescents

> "The moments of happiness we enjoy take us by surprise. It is not that we seize them, but that they seize us."
>
> —ASHLEY MONTAGU

show reading apathy, but we all must take responsibility for the conditions we create or ignore that may disengage children.

What's at Stake When We Lose Reading Joy?

Isn't focusing on joy frivolous when so many American schoolchildren cannot read at grade level? Dr. Steven Wolk asks, "If the experience of 'doing school' destroys children's spirit to learn, their sense of wonder, their curiosity about the world, and their willingness to care for the human condition, have we succeeded as educators, no matter how well our students do on standardized tests?" (2008). As long as educators and caregivers see reading as skills to acquire, which can be measured with tests and performed on demand in the classroom, fewer children will find a path to reading joy.

Failing to graduate a populace that enjoys reading has long-term consequences for all of us. According to the National Endowment for the Arts study *To Read or Not to Read*, avid adult readers in the United States vote, volunteer, and participate more in community life than adults who do not read as much (Iyengar and Ball 2007). Author Jennifer Nielsen asked in a 2018 speech, "Do we understand the societal implications of failing to help kids fall in love with reading?" Examining fourteen studies on the link between reading and empathy proves Nielsen's point. Reading fiction, in particular, increases your social-cognitive ability (Oatley 2016).

After decades of high-stakes standardized testing in the United States, we are not graduating more highly qualified people than we were a generation ago (Greene 2018). While reformers and politicians blame families and educators for the middle-of-the-pack rankings of United States schoolchildren on international tests, they fail to address the root cause—too many young people live in poverty, without meaningful, consistent access to the resources and opportunities they need. Examining testing data across decades, the Economic Policy Institute emphasized:

> *Because social class inequality is greater in the United States than in any of the countries with which we can reasonably be compared, the relative performance of US adolescents is better than it appears when countries' national average performance is conventionally compared. (Carnoy and Rothstein 2013)*

Factoring for poverty, American schoolchildren perform as well on standardized tests as anyone else (Carnoy and Rothstein 2013).

Instead of dismantling the systemic inequities in our school systems and communities that deny equal access and opportunities to many children—disproportionally children of color, indigenous children, and impoverished children—legislators and policy makers have turned schools into testing factories that grow curriculum and assessment companies' profits while ignoring children's intellectual, social, and physical growth altogether.

Our current testing culture in schools—a culture that belittles and undermines the role of joy in reading—significantly influences why so many young people hate to read. Fear of punitive consequences from district, state, and federal mandates for students' test performance drives educational decision-making in too many K–12 schools today. Administrators, educators, families, and children suffer drastic outcomes when students do not meet grade-level standards on state tests. Educators lose raises, stipends, school or grade-level assignments, and even their jobs. Children lose electives in order to attend a test prep or remediation course, sit in summer school, face grade retention, or do not graduate. The struggle is real. Forced to comply with outside requirements for students' performance on tests, many schools have narrowed their instructional focuses and resources toward improving test scores at the expense of everything else—sacrificing art, drama, and music courses, science labs and field trips, history and civics courses, librarians and libraries. Teachers, stripped of their professional autonomy, cannot afford to offer their students much voice or choice in the matter.

Let's be crystal clear—after decades of high-stakes testing in the United States, we don't have replicable studies proving that test prep workbooks and worksheets or computerized test prep programs have ever improved students' reading test scores long term. Instead, the pursuit of improved reading skills and scores might lead to just the opposite.

Asked to comment on the recently updated SAT test, Aaron Golumbfskie, education director of a respected SAT preparation agency, reinforced that engaged reading is the key to success on this high-stakes test (Hoover 2015): "The most fundamental change [in the updated SAT] is that there are many, many more words. If you don't read well and happily, this test isn't going to be your friend." Even the math sections of the updated SAT require more reading. Kids who read in volume consistently score in the top range on standardized reading tests (Adams 2006).

If reading volume and variety are the keys to reading achievement success, what conditions engage kids to read widely and in volume? Lots of joyful, independent, relevant reading (Guthrie 2008; Tatum 2009; Kittle 2013; Wilhelm, Smith, and Fransen 2014). We can conclude that a misguided focus on test scores doesn't increase test performance long term and denies many students opportunities to develop intrinsic motivation and interest in reading (Kohn 2018). Test prep crowds out a lot of authentic, engaging reading and writing!

You don't need fifteen studies to prove it, although metanalyses of studies exist (Moss and Young 2010; Krashen 2004); you can talk to fifteen random kids. If they trust you, they will tell you. Conferring with middle schoolers, Donalyn asked kids to share what made reading difficult or boring for them. Their honest responses reveal how school assignments and activities have influenced their attitudes about reading and school:

> "The only time I liked reading was third grade. Our teacher took us to the library every week and the librarian read to us on the rug."
>
> "My teacher won't let us read or write graphic novels for assignments, so I make them at home. I have a lot of homework, so I don't have much time."
>
> "We have these packets of homework that look like the tests. There's always, like, a ton of pages and it takes forever. Who wants to read after that?"
>
> "I am a slow reader and we have to do these notes [annotations]. I can't really understand what I am reading sometimes because I have to rush to finish my notes or I'll get a zero."
>
> "Every book we read in class takes forever and there's always a test."
>
> "We only have time to read in class if we finish our ['personalized' reading test prep computer program]. Most of the time I don't finish."
>
> "I don't have time between classes to go to the library and our teachers won't let us go during class."

While every reader has their own experiences, over and over, kids report that test prep instruction; an emphasis on projects, tests, and grades; a lack of choice or relevance in the texts they read at school; and limited access to books at school and home are the major factors contributing to their reading apathy.

Without reading joy, it is difficult for young people to develop lifelong reading habits or maintain enthusiasm for reading. When academic requirements for reading end, the only people still reading are people who find reading personally meaningful. When every bit of reading kids do springs from outside expectations from teachers and caregivers, and none comes from their personal reading interests and needs, reading belongs to school, not readers.

Our Role in Children's Joyful Reading

The lack of joyful reading in school is even more frustrating when we realize that the resources and attitudes our kids need to become readers are factors that educators have known about for years but that we, as a field and as a nation, haven't equitably provided to all young people.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Dr. Daniel Fader changed his high school reading course to provide his disengaged students with car manuals, cookbooks, comics, pulp westerns, and romances and set aside time each day in class for reading. For many students, his course was their last chance to pass English and graduate. Fader discovered that his students increased their reading volume, expanded their reading diet, and improved their reading skill. Fader's students also reported more motivation and interest in reading (Fader 1972). Fader proved *in the 1950s* that time to read,

choice, access, and enthusiastic encouragement from adults were successful to excite and support readers—to help them rediscover (or find for the first time) joy in reading. In every decade since, scholars and teachers have reaffirmed the conditions that engage young people with reading while improving their reading proficiency. Yet, faced with the pressures of mandates and assessments, our field looks for a quick fix in the next flashy program or unsubstantiated claim.

In environments where authentic learning is valued less than test scores, it is unlikely young people will experience reading as anything more than a chore. Psychology professor and author Susan Engel observes,

> *Decades of research have shown that in order to acquire skills and real knowledge in school, kids need to want to learn. You can force a child to stay in his or her seat, fill out a worksheet, or practice division. But you can't force a person to think carefully, enjoy books, digest complex information, or develop a taste for learning. To make that happen, you have to help the child find pleasure in learning—to see school as a source of joy. (2015)*

We are not just teaching the readers (and people) our students are today; we are teaching the readers and people they will become. If we want our students to develop lifelong reading interests, we have to show them how reading can be a joyful part of their learning and lives—now, not in some distant future when they are adults. Right now. Their reading experiences must matter more than their reading scores.

We, the adults in their lives, must believe it, too.

What We Can Do to Support Reading Joy

What conditions foster reading joy? How can we encourage young people to read and find more personal engagement with it? Experiences evoking reading joy vary from reader to reader and text to text, but educators and caregivers can reduce obstacles to reading joy and cultivate positive reading experiences for more young people. Fostering reading joy at school and home requires us to do several things:

Give readers an abundance of books and time. In our personal experience, it's not unusual to hear adults and children alike bemoan that they simply don't have time to read or that there aren't any interesting books. Joyful reading requires that young people have the necessary time to read and consistent access to books. Readers cannot benefit from regular reading time without meaningful, consistent access to engaging texts—both at school and at home. Ensuring children's and adolescents' book access remains one of the most significant influences on both academic reading achievement and personal motivation for reading (Neuman and Celano 2012).

Value readers' choices in their reading. Many educators know the feeling of pride that comes with seeing a student warm up to a text that they have read or chosen for their students. Yet, any educator who has assigned reading also knows that even if a child falls in love with a book we have required, many other children find the book does not resonate with them, leaves them feeling unseen, or even oppresses them (Ebarvia and Torres 2021). No matter how well-intentioned or informed our book selection process might be, when we choose one book for a whole group of readers, we leave some readers out. Additionally, we cannot expect children to be consistently joyful readers if they have no say in what they read and no opportunities or encouragement to discover and choose books with personal relevance. Assigning reading and valuing only the reading that we assign drains joy. As professionals, we can be experts in pedagogy that supports student choice, in the literature that will appeal to our young readers, and in the preferences and interests of the young people in our lives.

Make joyful reading the norm. In our personal conversations with readers of all ages, we've found that many of them are surprised to hear about how much we read or how we look forward to a book release by a favorite author as much as other fans anticipate a video game's or movie's release. When we adults model and share our own literate lives, we normalize the behaviors of being joyful readers—for students and other adults in the school who may not find reading joyful, yet. Granted, some may consider us over the top, but our passion for reading is evident. Kids benefit from

having reading enthusiasts in their lives. Adult reading mentors can help young people follow our lead, and we can structure our schools, homes, and libraries to be communities in which joyful reading thrives.

Encourage readers' authentic responses to their reading. When a reader is joyful, their response to their reading is genuine: they might laugh out loud at a passage, worry about or cheer on a character, or tell their friends about what they're reading. Most readers do not, spontaneously, seek out quizzes testing their knowledge of a book's content or design a project for the sole purpose of demonstrating their understanding.

As educators, we all need to determine students' progress. However, when every piece of reading results in the need for a student to complete a product of some kind or take a quiz, students soon grow tired of reading, even for pleasure. To support joyful reading, we can find ways to track growth in our students as readers without undermining or discounting their authentic responses.

It's not a secret: increasing test scores and raising engaged readers aren't disparate goals.

When young people experience reading engagement and joy, they read more. When young people read in volume, their confidence and competence as readers increase exponentially (when paired with effective reading instruction), and their reading proficiency grows. Joy feeds engagement and agency, which increases effort and practice. It's not a hard bridge to build, but it seems impossible to cross in too many classrooms.

In this chapter, we defined and explored reading joy and considered why reading joy remains out of reach for many young readers. In the following chapters, we will take a deeper look at the classroom and school systems, instructional moves, and reading advisory resources supporting reading joy.